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Abortion in the United States: An outstanding moral issue

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Abortion in the United States: An outstanding moral issue

Bachelor Thesis International Relations and Organisations:

Can We Trust Democracy to the Voters? The Origins of Public Preferences and Democratic
Competence

Abstract

The concept affective polarization has emerged as a hot topic in the last decade. Affective polarization captures the extent to which people have positive feelings towards their in-group and dislike and distrust the opposing group. While previous research focused on explaining this phenomenon via moral conviction theory, this research focuses on attitude importance and applies these theory on the abortion issue. This thesis aims to explain why different attitudes on abortion enhance affective polarization in the United States. Affective polarization can have negative consequences because it can lead to the erosion of democratic norms. Using data from the ANES, this paper argues that people who feel close towards a presidential candidate on the abortion issue and people who deem abortion an important topic are more highly affectively polarized than people who do not stand close to a presidential candidate and do not find abortion an important issue.

Keywords: affective polarization, attitude importance, abortion

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Introduction

In his first speech as president-elect Joe Biden pledged to *"be a President who seeks not to divide, but to unify. Who doesn't see Red and Blue states, but a United States"* (Transcript of President-elect Joe Biden's Victory Speech, 2020). Biden wants to unite the country, but it does not seem to be working; the gap between Republicans and Democrats is widening. The American people increasingly dislike and distrust the opposing party and their supporting partisans. This growing animosity between the parties and between partisans is called affective polarization (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, Westwood, 2018).

Studying affective polarization is important because the deepening of affective polarization decreases the willingness of parties and partisans to cooperate and compromise with the other group (Axelrod, Daymude & Forrest, 2021; McCoy, Rahman & Somer, 2018). This increasing hostility between partisans can encourage people to undermine democratic norms (Kingzette, Druckman, Klar, Krupnikov, Levendusky & Ryan, 2021). The undermining of democratic norms can, in turn, have worrying implications for the future of American democracy. Violating democratic norms is often accepted when the stakes are high (McCoy et al, 2018; Beauchamp, 2022). Such an outburst of violating democratic norms was seen in the Capitol attack on the 6th of January 2020. Here is seen how far partisans are willing to go by violating democratic norms to protect themselves from the reign of the other party.

The two main drivers of affective polarization are policy disagreements based on issues or ideology and partisan identity (Dias & Lelkes, 2022). Affective polarization can be caused by people's disagreement about salient policy issues or it can be caused by an evolved tendency to dislike social out-groups (Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes, 2012). The literature shows that the influence of policy disagreements on affective polarization is small (Dias & Lelkes, 2022; Iyengar et al, 2012). Instead, affective polarization can be explained by focusing on partisan identity. Partisan identity is a salient identifier because it is acquired at a young age and very stable over time (Iyengar et al, 2012; Iyengar et al, 2018). This in- and out-group differentiation has led Republicans and Democrats to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively.

Even though policy disagreements have a small effect on affective polarization according to the literature, it is evident that it has an influence on some attitudes. The American public is for instance growing towards each other on matters such as gay rights and gender roles. The only outstanding issue here is abortion (Baldassarri & Park, 2020).

Since abortion is the only issue on which the public is growing apart, there has to be an explanation for why policy disagreements on the abortion case do have an effect on affective polarization. One possible way of explaining how policy disagreements have an effect on affective polarization, is by focusing on attitude importance. Attitude importance is a feature of attitude strength. Attitudes can be weak or strong. Weak attitudes can easily be changed and are unlikely to shape behaviour and strong attitudes are “*the attitudes that matter most for an individual’s thoughts, intentions, and behavior*” (Howe & Krosnick, 2017, p. 328). An attitude is strong if a person attaches significance to his or her attitude. Policy disagreements can therefore have a larger influence on affective polarization when a person believes the issue to be important to him or her personally.

Abortion is an issue where there still remains a lot of policy disagreement amongst partisans. Abortion has been a salient issue in American politics for over 50 years. This specifically began during the years leading up to *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. Before the installation of *Roe v. Wade*, politicians were already trying to take advantage of the emerging divide over abortion. Richard Nixon used abortion to polarize the debate and take advantage of this divide (Beauchamp, 2022). Society was split up into two camps: pro-choice and pro-life.

The importance of abortion was also eminent in the presidential elections of 2016. Trump campaigned on the promise to appoint conservative judges to the Supreme Court. These judges would then be able to strike down the federal right to abortion (Beauchamp, 2022). The 2022 Supreme Court ruling in the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, which banned the federal right to abortion, will only further increase the divide between Democrats and Republicans. ‘Red’ states will enact more abortion restrictions, whereas ‘blue’ states will try to help people to circumvent abortion restrictions and offer abortions (Beauchamp, 2022).

This recent event has raised yet again awareness of the abortion issue, it is therefore important to look at the influence of attitude important and the abortion issue on affective polarization. Since policy disagreements are still very prominent in abortion attitudes, it is likely that there is a relationship between abortion attitudes and affective polarization. The research question that follows this gap is: *How does attitude importance on abortion influence affective polarization in the United States?*

Using survey data from the American National Election Study (ANES) 2020, this research will argue that people who deem abortion to be important are more highly affectively polarized than people who do not deem abortion important. Finding an answer to the research question is important because it can lead to a better understanding of the widening divide among the American people.

Literature and theory

Affective polarization

In the last two decades, Americans' feelings about their own party have not changed a lot but their feelings about the opposing party have become much more negative (Webster & Abramowitz 2017; Bafumi & Shapiro 2009; Iyengar et al 2012, Garrett & Bankert 2018). Supporters of each party believe that people of the opposing party are very different from themselves in terms of social characteristics, political beliefs and values (Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). Negative feelings against people who are different has spilled over from the political sphere to dimensions of social life. In 1960 only 4% of Democrats and 5% of Republicans reported they would be unhappy if their children married someone from the out-party. In 2010, those numbers had risen to 33% and 49% (Dias & Lelkes, 2022).

Scholars agree that affective polarization has risen. However, there is a debate among scholars about the explanation of the rise and intensification of affective polarization. These explanations can be classified into two categories.

The first category argues that increased group-based differentiation is the central cause of affective polarization. This group-based model or party-over-policy hypothesis argues that affective polarization is rooted in a tendency to dislike social out-groups (Dias & Lelkes, 2022; Huddy & Yair, 2021). Affective polarization is therefore a consequence of increased social dissimilarity between Democrats and Republicans. This increased partisan dissimilarity has intensified hostility towards the out-party because rival partisans perceive more differences between their in-party and the out-party in terms of group-allegiances and basic worldviews. The group-based model is grounded in social identity theory. *“A social identity involves a subjective sense of belonging to a group that is internalized to varying degrees, resulting in individual differences in identity strength, a desire to positively distinguish the group from others, and the development of ingroup bias”* (Huddy, Mason & Aarøe, 2015, p. 3). There is a need among members of a group to differentiate their own group positively from the other group. When people identify with a group or party, they are motivated to act in the interest of their group. They divide the world into in-groups and out-groups. This distinction between an in-group and an out-group generates positive feelings towards the in-group and negative feelings toward the out-group. Affective polarization can be defined as *“this widening chasm between in- and out-party affect”* (Dias & Lelkes, 2022, p. 775).

The second category specifies that affective polarization is caused by the growing ideological divergence among elites and the public on policy views. This policy-based model or policy-over-party hypothesis argues that affective polarization reflects parties' disagreements about salient policy issues (Bougher 2017; Huddy & Yair, 2021; Dias & Lelkes, 2022, Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). Affective polarization has risen because elites and mass partisans increasingly follow ideological lines in forming attitudes on policy issues (Bougher 2017; Webster & Abramowitz 2017).

The policy-based model is grounded in belief congruence theory. This theory argues that out-party hostility is based on different beliefs between oneself and members of the group (Bougher, 2017). Preferences about particular policies predict feelings of coldness towards the out-party and its political candidates.

The group-based model is seen as a stronger predictor of affective polarization than the policy-based model. However, even though evidence suggests that the influence of policy disagreements on affective polarization is small, it still has an important impact in some cases (Dias & Lelkes, 2022). The difficulty with these two different explanations is that ideology and policy preferences are highly correlated. It is therefore hard to distinguish what the main driver of affective polarization is.

This overlap between ideological and policy differences is also visible in the abortion case. Abortion is an important issue on which elites and the masses disagree, it can be seen as a policy issue on which people disagree, or a driver of partisanship (Dias & Lelkes, 2022). On the one hand, partisanship can bring about policy preferences, so when an individual is Republican, that person is also likely to support abortion restrictions. On the other hand, partisanship can be in the issues because parties have known stances on policy issues. So when a person's policy preferences are clear, it is also clear which party they vote for (Dias & Lelkes, 2022).

When a partisan is pro-choice, that person is likely to be a Democrat, when a partisan is pro-life, that person is likely to be a Republican. Alternatively, if someone is a pro-life Democrat, it potentially signals that the person is a non-loyal Democrat (Dias & Lelkes, 2022). Since abortion is a contested topic in American politics and the public wildly disagrees it is important to understand why there are such disagreements. A possible way of explaining this difference is by looking at people's attitude strength on the abortion issue to explain affective polarization.

Attitude strength

Research on the psychology of attitudes has demonstrated that some attitudes are consequential for people's thoughts and actions while others have little effect on people's thoughts and actions. Attitudes can therefore be classified for their strength, they are either weak or strong (Krosnick, Boninger, Chuang, Berent & Carnot, 1993). Strong attitudes can predict behaviour, weak ones cannot. Attitude strength can best be defined by its four characteristics, they are: resistant to change, stable over time, influential on cognition and influential on action (Howe & Krosnick, 2017). An attitude is strong when it possesses all these attributes. There are different features of attitude strength (Miller & Peterson, 2004).

Past research on the relationship between attitude strength and abortion attitudes, has only focused on one of these features, namely moral conviction.

Attitudes that are made considering what is morally right or wrong, are often defined as strong attitudes. A moral conviction can be defined as "*the belief that a given attitude is a reflection of one's core feelings or beliefs about fundamental issues of right and wrong*" (Skitka, Hanson, Morgan & Wisneski, 2021, p. 348), or as "*a person's perception that an attitude is grounded in his or her core beliefs*" (Garrett & Bankert, 2018, p. 624).

Attitudes that are based on moral convictions are viewed as objectively true and universal. People who base their attitudes on moral convictions are therefore likely to be intolerant of people who disagree with them and are also less likely to compromise (Skitka et al, 2021). This is important in relation to affective polarization. If people are intolerant of people who disagree with them, they will increasingly dislike each other. When people have strong moral convictions they distance themselves from people with different attitudes. Moral convictions have the power to "*arouse certain negative emotions, engender hostile opinions, and inspire punitive action*" (Ryan, 2014, p. 380). These negative feelings can fuel disagreement between the in- and out-group.

Relying on moral convictions is difficult because people can decide for themselves what is moral or not. The most important thing to take away from moral convictions is that, even if abortion is seen as a moral issue by the greater public, individuals can still disagree. How abortion influences affective polarization can therefore be hard to measure via moral convictions. It is therefore necessary to look at different features of attitude strength to determine what the influence of abortion is on affective polarization. The feature that will be discussed next is attitude importance.

Attitude importance

As was discussed above, researchers have identified different features of attitudes that are related to strength, one of those features is attitude importance. Attitude importance is “*an individual’s subjective judgement of the significance he or she attaches to his or her attitude*” (Howe & Krosnick, 2017, p. 329). When someone deems an issue to be important, it can determine their behaviour and actions, which makes it a strong attitude.

Attitude importance can be seen as a belief that links an attitude to an attribute. Attitude importance is consequential because of its status as a belief. Perceiving an attitude as personally important leads people to use it in processing information, making decisions and taking action (Boninger, 1995).

To determine when perception influences the impact of actions, it is important to dive deeper into processing literature. Fazio (1990) made a distinction between spontaneous and deliberative processing. With spontaneous processing, people behave without considering their attitudes. With deliberative processing, decisions are made after consideration of all factors. (Howe & Krosnick, 2017). Attitude importance is most helpful for understanding situations that entail deliberative processing (Boninger, 1995). Deliberative processing “*involves the scrutiny of available information and an analysis of positive and negative features, of costs and benefits*” (Fazio, 1990, p. 89). Deliberative processing is necessary when there are a lot of disagreements on policy issues. This weighing of positive and negative sides is at the basis of forming behaviour and taking action.

This deliberative processing is also necessary when someone is forming an opinion on abortion. The abortion debate is often seen as a binary opinion to choose between pro-life and pro-choice, but the decision is more difficult. Few Americans have an absolutist view on the legality of abortion. Public attitudes depend on the circumstances (Pew Research Centre, 2022). For instance when a pregnancy endangers a woman’s life, the baby has severe health problems or the woman is pregnant due rape, people’s attitudes can shift from between more pro-life or more pro-choice. With all the necessary information available, a deliberative attitude can be formed.

By focusing on attitude importance instead of moral convictions, this thesis will research what the effect of attitude importance on the abortion issue is on affective polarization. It is important to know what causes affective polarization in the United States, since we do not want another outburst of violence, such as the Capitol attack, or something even worse with more casualties.

Looking at the abortion issue, it becomes clear that there are large differences between Democrats' and Republicans' views towards abortion. Around 80% of Democrats believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases and only 38% of Republicans say abortion should be legal in all or most cases (Pew Research Centre, 2022).

As was discussed earlier, such policy disagreements on abortion matter for affective polarization. In previous studies, the impact of important policy issues such as abortion was measured by looking at people's candidate preference, since candidates are the most prominent representation of the political party (Krosnick, 1988). This indicates how much closer each voter's own stand is to the candidates' stand. This feeling of closeness can be used to study affective polarization. The hypothesis that follows is:

H1: The closer a respondent feels towards a candidate's position on abortion, the higher the feeling of affective polarization

Running up to the presidential elections in 2016 it became clear that Trump wanted to abolish the federal right to abortion. During his time as President, Trump nominated three judges to the Supreme Court, which led to a 6-3 conservative majority. It became clear that the Court would try to ban the federal right to abortion. Because of the nomination of three judges, the chance that the federal right to abortion would be banned grew. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi stated about the nomination of the third judge that *"Everything hangs in the balance with this nomination: A woman's constitutional right to make her own medical decisions about her own body [...] and the right of every American to have a voice in our democracy"* (Kumar, 2020). The legacy of Trump's presidency is that he nominated three Supreme Court judges, that is how Trump and his conservative supporters eventually paved the way for the federal right to abortion being banned.

For the fall midterm elections that were held on November the 8th 2022, the abortion issue increased in importance. This can be explained by the ending of the federal right to legal abortion (Pew Research Centre, 2022). However, what is evident is that the importance of the abortion issue increased for the Democrats, for the Republicans it did not become more important (Pew Research Centre, 2022). When attitudes are strong they are deemed important and this indicates that they are resistant to change. It will therefore be hard to compromise between people who both deem the issue to be important. These disagreements on issues can fuel affective polarization between the parties and their supporters.

However, as was also clear in the midterm elections, people do not deem every issue equally important. So we should expect that when someone finds abortion important, they hold more negative feelings towards people who do not share their opinion.

When someone does not deem abortion important, they find it easier compromise and will have less negative feelings (Howe & Krosnick, 2017). What becomes clear from the above discussion is that if people deem an issue so important that they cannot compromise, they will feel a wider chasm between themselves and their opponents. Therefore it is necessary to incorporate importance as a second independent variable, since importance of the attitude can also explain why people are more highly affectively polarized. The hypothesis that follows is:
H2: *The more important people find the abortion issue, the higher the feeling of affective polarization*

Research design

As was mentioned in the research question, the focus of this thesis is finding out what the effect of attitude importance on the abortion issue is on affective polarization in the United States. To answer this question, data from the *American National Election Studies* (ANES) data source will be used, which was conducted in 2020. The data is relevant because it contains the variables that are of use to this research. The data is reliable because it is a national probability sample. The people are randomly selected and are therefore a good representation of the entire population.

The ANES is a cross-sectional study, held before and after the 2020 presidential elections. This research will focus on the panel study before the presidential elections, to avoid the effects of events between the pre and post data. The study has been conducted every four years since 1948, this indicates that the questions asked in the survey are grounded in previous data and will therefore make reliable variables. Respondents were randomly assigned to different mode groups. There was one group that was questioned only by web, a mixed group of web and phone and the last group was a mix of web, phone and video. Randomly assigning individuals is important because the way questions are asked can impact the survey data. The random assignment to different mode groups will randomize these biases and make the data more reliable.

The focus of this thesis will be a single case study, the United States. The US was chosen as a case because of several reasons. Firstly, the US was chosen because abortion and affective polarization have been heavily studied in the past there. The gross of the articles and existing theory focuses on the US. Secondly, the topic is very relevant in the US today due to recent developments. With the decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the abortion issue is heavily discussed in the political realm and the media. Lastly, the US was chosen because affective polarization is a trend over recent years.

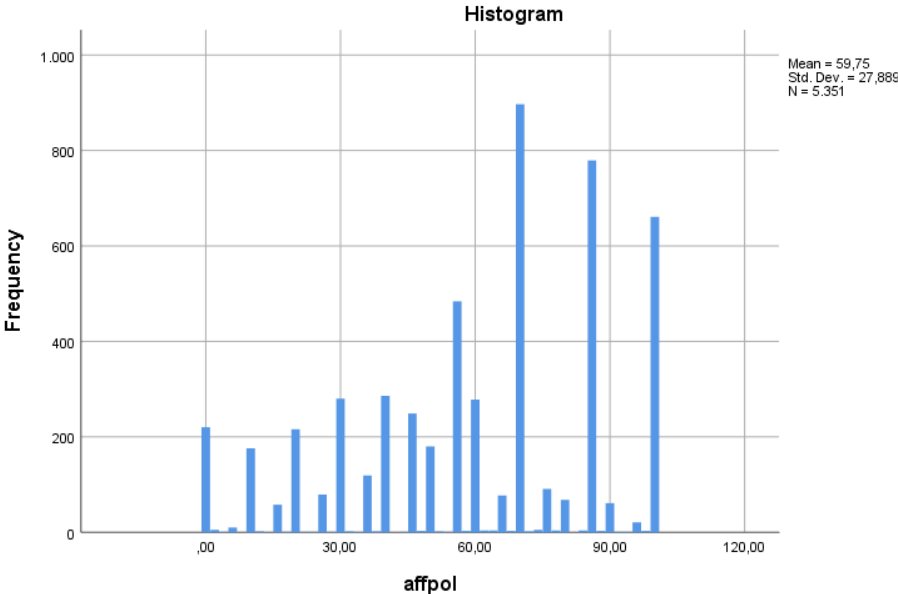
The population of the study will focus on people who are eligible to vote and who define themselves as partisans. Because this focuses on the electorate which identifies as Democrat or Republican and according to the literature, these people are growing apart. Before running the analysis, it is important to operationalize the dependent, independent variables and control variables in relation to the data.

Dependent variable: Affective polarization

Firstly the dependent variable, affective polarization. Survey self-reports are most often used as measuring techniques for obtaining data on affective polarization, the most prominent being the feeling thermometer (Iyengar et al, 2018). I will use the feeling thermometer towards the Republican party and the feeling thermometer towards the Democratic party. With the feeling thermometer, respondents are asked to rate the Democratic and Republican party on a scale ranging from cold (0) to warm (100). A 0 would indicate that they have unsympathetic and unfavourable feelings towards the party. A 100 would indicate that they have very sympathetic and favourable feelings towards the party.

To measure this, a new variable ‘affpol’ will be created, which is computed as the absolute difference between the score given to the in-party and the out-party (Iyengar et al, 2018; Reiljan, 2020). The focus of the study is partisans, so people who identify as Democrats or Republicans. Therefore, Independents are filtered out of the analysis.

Figure 1: Distribution of dependent variable affective polarization



Above is a histogram of the frequency of the dependent variable affective polarization. Higher values indicate higher feelings of affective polarization. In the histogram is seen that the mean is relatively high (Mean = 59.75), which indicates that the feelings towards the out-group are relatively negative. The standard deviation is 27.889, this indicates that the data is more spread out in relation to the mean. However, this can possibly be explained by the differences in partisan strength. People who are strong partisans are more likely to largely be above the mean, weak partisans are more likely to largely be below the mean.

Independent variable: Closeness to a presidential candidate on the abortion issue

Secondly, the independent variable, closeness to a presidential candidate on the abortion issue. This variable will be operationalized by the use of proximity scores, these are used because it is a prominent predictor in prior studies. The proximity score indicates how close a partisan's stand is to a candidate's stand, this can help to predict the feelings towards the in- and out-party (Krosnick, 1988; Leeper & Robison, 2020).

To create the proximity score, several variables have to be used. The variables that will be used to make the proximity are, firstly the partisan's self-placement on the abortion scale, this is their attitude towards abortion. This was measured by asking respondents which opinion agrees most with their own view. Opinion 1 is *"by law, abortion should never be permitted"*. Opinion 2 is *"the law should permit abortion only in case of rape, incest, or when the woman's life is in danger"*. Opinion 3 is *"the law should permit abortion other than for rape/incest/danger to woman but only after need clearly established"*. Opinion 4 is *"by law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice"*. Secondly, the proximity includes the partisan's perception of the Democratic candidate's attitude towards abortion. This was measured by asking respondents which of the opinions above they would place Joe Biden. Lastly, the proximity includes the partisan's perception of the Republican candidate's attitude towards abortion. This was measured by asking respondents which of the opinions above they would place Donald Trump.

In order to create the 'closeness' variable, two proximity measures had to be created using absolute values. One variable where higher values equal more proximity to the Republican candidate and one where higher values equal more proximity to the Democratic candidate. The variable 'closeness' was created via the if commands. If someone identified as a Republican, their score is higher proximity to Republican candidate, if they are a Democrat, there score is higher proximity to Democratic candidate.

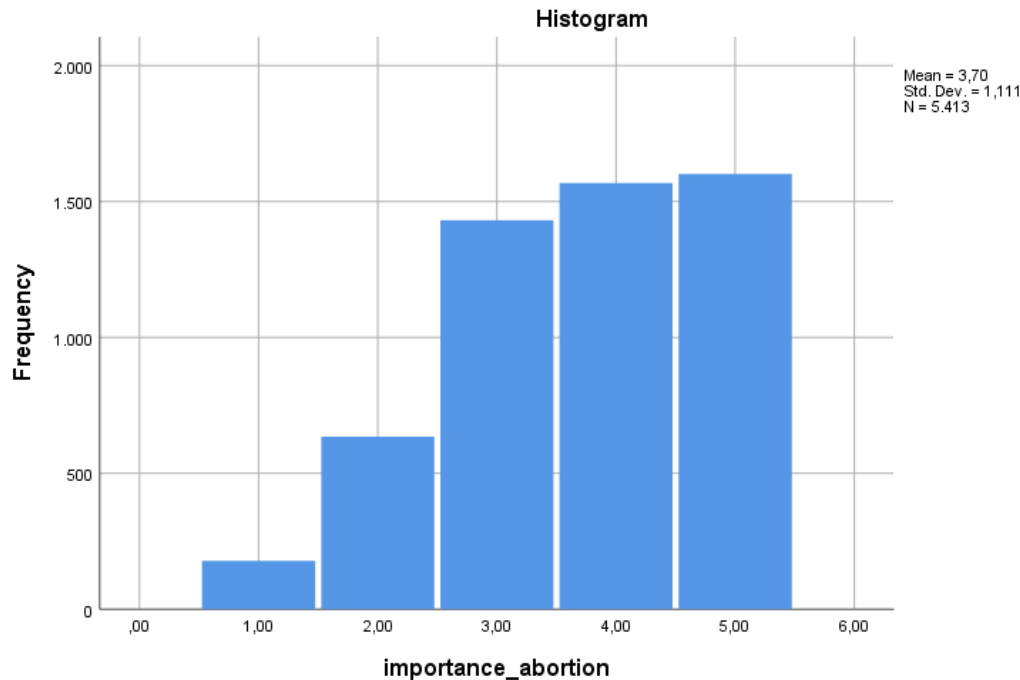
Independent variable: Importance of the abortion issue

Lastly, the second independent variable, the importance of the abortion issue. The variable 'importance_abortion' was created by recoding the original variable importance of abortion issue in the dataset, that way all the missing values could be identified.

In this research it is operationalized as how important people find the abortion issue personally. Attitude importance is most frequently measured by asking participants to report how important the attitude or object is to them, how concerned they are about it, or how much they care about it (Howe & Krosnick, 2017).

For this analysis, respondents were asked “How important is this issue to you personally?”. The answers were given on a 5-point scale: 1. Not at all important 2. Not too important 3. Somewhat important 4. Very important 5. Extremely important.

Figure 2: Distribution of independent variable importance of the abortion issue



Above a histogram is shown of the frequency of how important people deem the abortion issue. The mean is 3.70, which indicates that it is between somewhat important and very important. On a 1 to 5 scale, this can be seen as relatively high. The standard deviation is 1.11, the data is spread but most of the answers range from 3 to 5 scale of importance.

Control variables

In previous research on affective polarization, several control variables were added to the analysis. The most used control variables are demographics. Demographics consist of gender, age, education and race/ethnicity (Garrett & Bankert, 2018; Malka & Lelkes, 2010; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). Gender and race are both social divides, where group-related attitudes are subject to social norms (Iyengar et al, 2018).

We should expect these variables to have an impact on the result because they can also generate in-group and out-group attitudes. Especially gender can play an important role in behaviour regarding the abortion issue (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019). The control variables gender, education and race/ethnicity are coded as dummy variables. For gender, respondents were asked if they identified as male or female (56.3% = female).

For education, respondents were asked what the highest level of school was they had completed. For race/ethnicity, respondents self-identified with their race/ ethnicity. For the control variable age, the respondents were asked how old they were, this scale ranges from 18-80 (mean = 52.8698). The age coefficient tells us what the difference is for every increased year.

Besides demographics, ideology is another control variable (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2015). Respondents were asked the following question “*Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you thought much about this?*”. The scale ranges from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Ideology can be a cause for affective polarization. It has to be controlled because it can explain a part of the variance. Ideology and policy disagreements both influence affective polarization, so to minimize the influence of ideology, the variable has to be controlled for in the model.

The last control variable is strength of partisan identity. Respondents were asked the following question “*How important is being a Democrat/ a Republican/ an Independent to your identity?*”. This scale ranges from not at all important to extremely important. Partisan identity can explain part of the variation in the dependent variable affective polarization. Partisan identity importance is therefore controlled for in the model. The different control variables are further explained in Appendix A¹.

The statistical model

The stated hypotheses will be tested using a multiple linear regression analysis. Multiple regression is used when one wants to predict a dependent variable based on two or more independent variables. In this case, predicting affective polarization, based on people’s stance on abortion and how important they find abortion. With multiple regression analysis, the overall fit of the model and the contribution of the different predictors to the total variance can be explained.

Before running the analysis, it is important to check the assumptions that have to be met when a multiple regression analysis is conducted.² As becomes clear from Appendix A, the assumptions normality, homoscedasticity, linearity and multicollinearity are all met. The casewise diagnostics show that there are 5 outlying cases. However, the N is large (4210) therefore the cases do not have a large impact on the results. The outliers in the model are also identified in Appendix A.

¹ See Appendix A for a description of the variables

² See appendix A for assumption checks

Analysis

In hypothesis 1, I argued that the closer a respondent feels towards a candidate's position on abortion, the higher the feeling of affective polarization. Therefore I expect that if a respondent feels very close towards the Democratic presidential candidate, Joe Biden, or the Republican presidential candidate, Donald Trump's position on abortion, he or she will be more highly affectively polarized.

Table 1 provides the results of the multiple linear regression models. In model 1, affective polarization is regressed on closeness to a presidential candidate on the abortion issue and importance of the abortion issue. In model 2 the control variables gender, age, education, race/ethnicity, ideology and party identity importance are also added.

A positive coefficient for closeness would be consistent with hypothesis 1. However, for model 1 the coefficient for closeness is negative and statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). This indicates that the closer someone feels towards a presidential candidate on the abortion issue, the less affectively polarized they are.

For model 2, the coefficient for closeness is positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). This indicates that the closer someone feels towards a presidential candidate on the abortion issue, the higher affectively polarized they are. With a 1 unit increase, so when someone feels closer to a candidate's view on abortion, affective polarization rises with 0.888 points. Based on model 2, it is expected that people who feel very close to a candidate's view on abortion are more highly affectively polarized by 2.664 scale points than people who do not feel close to a candidate's view on abortion. The expected value for affective polarization at the minimum proximity is 21.623, the expected value at the maximum proximity is 26.951.

What becomes clear from the analysis of hypothesis 1, is that it is necessary to add the control variables to the model. By adding the control variables to the model, the constant of affective polarization decreased with over 20 points, indicating that without control variables people were more highly affectively polarized. On top of that, adding the control variables influenced the closeness variable. It differed not just in strength, but also in direction, it changes from negative to positive. This difference in result justifies the implementing of the control variables, they were necessary to get a reliable result.

Table 1: Multiple linear regression model

	Model 1	Model 2
(constant)	46.358*** (1.477)	24.287*** (2.690)
Closeness	-0.519*** (0.190)	0.888*** (0.252)
Importance abortion	3.775*** (0.378)	1.905*** (0.352)
Gender (Ref. = Male)		
Female		0.518 (0.758)
Age		0.111*** (0.023)
Education (Ref. = Less than high school)		
High school graduate		-2.648 (1.983)
College no degree		1.513 (1.918)
College degree		0.818 (1.798)
Race/ethnicity (Ref. = White)		
Black		-2.253 (1.451)
Hispanic		-4.087** (1.401)
Asian/Hawaiian		-7.522*** (2.038)
Native American/Alaskan		-6.857* (3.253)
Multiple Races		3.040 (2.323)
Ideology		2.386*** (0.302)

Party Identity Importance		8.284*** (0.291)
R ²	0.025	0.221
Adj. R ²	0.024	0.219
F-statistic	53.314	85.163
N	4210	4210

Note: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in brackets.

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.1$

In hypothesis 2 I argued that the more important someone deems the abortion issue to be, the higher the feeling of affective polarization. Therefore I expect that if someone deems the abortion issue more important, they will be more highly affectively polarized.

A positive coefficient for importance of the abortion issue would be consistent with hypothesis 2. The coefficient for importance of the abortion issue is indeed positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) for both model 1 and 2. However, what is an evident difference between the models is the strength of the importance coefficient. By adding the control variables to the model, the strength decreases from 3.775 to 1.905. This also proves why adding the control variables was a necessary condition to receive a reliable analysis.

Based on model 2, a 1 unit increase on the importance scale, so increasing in importance, leads to a 1.905 points rise on the affective polarization scale. It is expected that people who deem the abortion issue extremely important are more highly affectively polarized by 7.62 scale points than people who deem the issue not important at all. The expected value for people who deem abortion not at all important is 24.287, the expected value for people who deem abortion extremely important is 31.907.

Now that the coefficients have been analysed, it is important to look at the R² of both the models. The regression in model 1 shows an R² of 0.025. This indicates that 2.5% of the variance in the dependent variable can be explained by the model. The regression in model 2 show an R² of 0.221. This indicates that 22.1% of the variance in the dependent variable can be explained by the model. Therefore, adding the control variables to the regression analysis largely increased the variance that can be explained by the model. Model 2 is therefore a better fit.

Looking at the effect of the control variables, it becomes clear that they differ in strength and significance. Overall, the results from the control variables are not odd. However, there are some interesting results.

Beginning with ethnicity, what becomes clear from table 1 is that people who identify as 'white' are more highly affectively polarized than all the other races, except multiple races.

On top of that, the ideology coefficients show that there are large differences between liberals and conservatives. The ideology scale ranges from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. The results show that an increase on the scale, so when someone becomes more conservative, affective polarization increases with 2.386 points. Conservatives are therefore more highly affectively polarized than liberals. However, due to time and resource constraints this thesis will not focus on explaining why conservatives are more polarized than liberals.

Lastly, the party identity importance variable shows differences between partisans. The party identity importance scale ranges from not at all important to extremely important. The results show that an increase on the scale, so when party identity becomes more important to someone, affective polarization increases with 8.284 points. People who deem being a Democrat or Republican as an important part of their identity are more highly affectively polarized than people who deem it not as important.

What can be concluded from the above analysis, is that both hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 2 can be confirmed. Respondents who stand closer to a presidential candidate's view on abortion are more highly affectively polarized than people who stand further away from a presidential candidate's view on abortion. Also, respondents who deem abortion to be an important issue are more highly affectively polarized than people who deem abortion as a less important issue.

Conclusion

It is important to understand what causes affective polarization in the United States in order to diminish affective polarization in the future. This thesis has aimed to determine how attitude importance on the abortion issue has influenced affective polarization in the United States. In the above analysis, I argued that feeling close to a presidential candidate on the abortion issue leads to a higher feeling of affective polarization. The result of the analysis can confirm hypothesis 1. On top of that, I also argued that attitude importance can strengthen the relationship between the abortion issue and affective polarization. This is indeed the case. People who deem abortion to be an important issue have a higher feeling of affective polarization. This result can confirm hypothesis 2. However, adding control variables to the model was necessary to get a reliable result.

This thesis is in line with the previous literature, which suggests that people who feel close to a party or politician, experience more negative feelings against the other party than people who do not feel close to a party or politician. This thus sheds new light on how abortion still influences the widening chasm between the in- and out-party effect. In the remainder of this conclusion, I will discuss the limitations of this study, possible future work and the broader implications of this thesis.

Despite the evidence of the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable, there are also some limitations to this research. In this thesis, all the important variables, affective polarization, closeness to a presidential candidate on the abortion issue and importance of abortion attitude, are all measured by self-survey reports. These self-survey-based indicators are seen by some scholars as unreliable measurements. The responses are susceptible to exaggeration or suppression based on normative pressures. It is not reliable to see people's 'true' identification on the self-placement scale because the respondent themselves decide their stance (Iyengar et al, 2018).

Furthermore, the dependent variable does not capture the full influence of affective polarization. In the analysis, affective polarization is measured by subtracting the feelings towards the different parties. This focus on parties only fails to capture the whole story. The widening chasm and negative feelings respondents perceive are not just about the parties. Affective polarization is larger than that and also generates more negative feelings towards individual partisans. The measurement focuses on the in-out difference between parties, not between the supporters of the parties.

If these feelings towards individual partisans were also taken into account, the results would have more validity and explain multiple facets of affective polarization. We should expect different results because the results would then encompass affective polarization on the elite level, towards the elite and towards the mass public. Affective polarization could then be explained as a whole on all levels and not just focused on the negative feelings against political parties. However, this could not be achieved due to time and resource constraints.

On top of that, the independent variable closeness focuses on the closeness to a presidential candidate's view on the abortion issue, not on the party. The presidential candidates in the 2020 American presidential election, Joe Biden and Donald Trump, can be seen as the representators of the Democratic and Republican party. However, Biden's and Trump's view on abortion are not the same as the entire party's stance. This is a limitation of the research, since the thesis focuses on the presidential candidate's stance and not on the party's stance.

Additionally, this research has focused on the causes of different abortion stances from an identification perspective, not from a religious perspective. Identifying with a presidential candidate's stance on abortion was seen as the measurement of closeness. However a large part of the American population identifies with a Christian identity. This can be seen as a limitation of the research since it did not include religious standpoints. The thesis focused on group-based identification focusing on political parties, not on religious groups.

Lastly, the data was collected from a survey that was held in the year 2020. More recent data was not yet available. However, because *Roe v. Wade* was overturned in 2022, the situation in the United States might have changed. Pew research centre has already proven that for the fall midterms in November 2022, abortion had already risen in importance as a voting issue because of the federal ban on abortion. The research showed that abortion was the most prominent issue on which people would decide who to vote for (Pew Research Centre, 2022). Still it can be argued that 2020 was an important year. Even though Trump did not get re-elected as President, his nomination of three conservative judges to the Supreme Court between 2016 and 2020 were necessary to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

Because the scope of this research is limited due to time and resource shortages, there are still some interesting questions that future research could shed more light upon.

For instance, the research could focus on how the current developments due to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* influence affective polarization. Since abortion has increased in importance, this could also have led to a growing feeling of affective polarization between parties and amongst partisans.

Future research should therefore focus on the same question with more recent data to see what the impact of the federal ban on abortion is on affective polarization.

Furthermore, future research could focus on researching the influence of abortion on affective polarization by comparing the different features of attitude strength. It can then be determined which feature has a greater influence, moral convictions or attitude importance.

Lastly, past research and this research have a specific focus on the United States. Future research could turn away from the US and its two-party system and focus on democracies that have a multi-party system instead. Abortion in the US is a hot topic and in other countries this may be less so. However, especially in religious democracies the debate over abortion is still contested and has the ability to create tension between the people. Looking at the influence of abortion on affective polarization in these religious democracies is therefore an interesting subject for future research.

This thesis has some important implications for the general academic debate and the United States specifically. For the academic debate, this paper sheds light on new indicators. Whereas previous research has focused largely on explaining abortion attitudes from the domain of moral conviction theory, this research has focused on explaining abortion attitudes based on attitude importance. The results have shown that there is evidence to assume that attitude importance is indeed crucial in explaining variation in abortion attitudes.

For the United States, these results sadly imply that affective polarization is still very high and the population still feels very negatively about the other party. The abortion issue has infiltrated the political sphere for over 50 years ago and will not leave it anytime soon. The future will only tell if the Supreme Court will ever reinstate the federal right to abortion. For now, it is important for the US to try and diminish the differences between partisans in order to prevent more democratic erosion and the sowing of hatred amongst the population. Because if the population clashes and the country is split up into two different camps, it becomes almost impossible to compromise and create unity in the United States.

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Appendix A

A1 – Control variables values

Control variable	Values
Gender Ref. Category = Male	0 = 'Male' 1 = 'Female'
Age	Range from 18-80
Education Ref. category = Less than high school	0 = 'Less than high school' 1 = 'High school graduate' 2 = 'Some college but no degree' 3 through 7 = 'College degree'
Race / ethnicity Ref. category = White	0 = 'White, non-Hispanic' 1 = 'Black, non-Hispanic' 2 = 'Hispanic' 3 = 'Asian or Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic alone' 4 = 'Native American/Alaska Native or other race, non-Hispanic alone' 5 = Multiple races, non-Hispanic
Ideology	0 = 'Extremely liberal' 1 = 'Liberal' 2 = 'Slightly liberal' 3 = 'Moderate; middle of the road' 4 = 'Slightly conservative' 5 = 'Conservative' 6 = 'Extremely conservative'
Party identity importance	0 = 'Not at all important' 1 = 'A little important' 2 = 'Moderately important' 3 = 'Very important' 4 = 'Extremely important'

RECODE V203401 (1=0) (2=1) (ELSE=SYSMIS) INTO gender.

EXECUTE.

RECODE V201507x (MISSING=SYSMIS) (ELSE=Copy) INTO age.

EXECUTE.

RECODE V201510 (8=7) (7=6) (6=5) (5=4) (4=3) (3=2) (2=1) (1=0) (ELSE=SYSMIS) INTO education.

EXECUTE.

RECODE V201549x (6=5) (5=4) (4=3) (3=2) (2=1) (1=0) (ELSE=SYSMIS) INTO ethnicity.

EXECUTE.

RECODE V201200 (6=5) (5=4) (4=3) (3=2) (2=1) (1=0) (7=6) (ELSE=SYSMIS) INTO ideology.

EXECUTE.

RECODE V201232 (5=0) (4=1) (3=2) (2=3) (1=4) (ELSE=SYSMIS) INTO party_importance.

EXECUTE.

Casewise Diagnostics^a

Case Number	Std. Residual	affpol	Predicted Value	Residual
3174	-3,006	,00	71,8131	-71,81307
5975	-3,040	,00	72,6082	-72,60823
6365	-3,023	,00	72,2200	-72,21996
6584	-3,158	,00	75,4385	-75,43849
6696	-3,129	5,00	79,7348	-74,73478

a. Dependent Variable: affpol

REGRESSION

/MISSING LISTWISE

/STATISTICS COEFF OUTS R ANOVA COLLIN TOL CHANGE

/CRITERIA=PIN(.05) POUT(.10)

/NOORIGIN

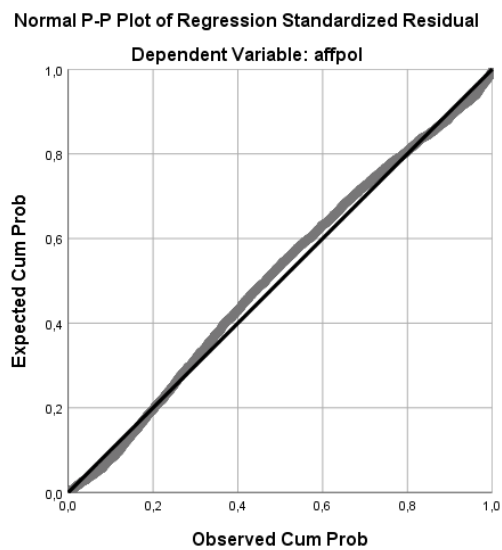
/DEPENDENT affpol

/METHOD=ENTER closeness importance_abortion female age HighSchoolGraduate
CollegeNoDegree

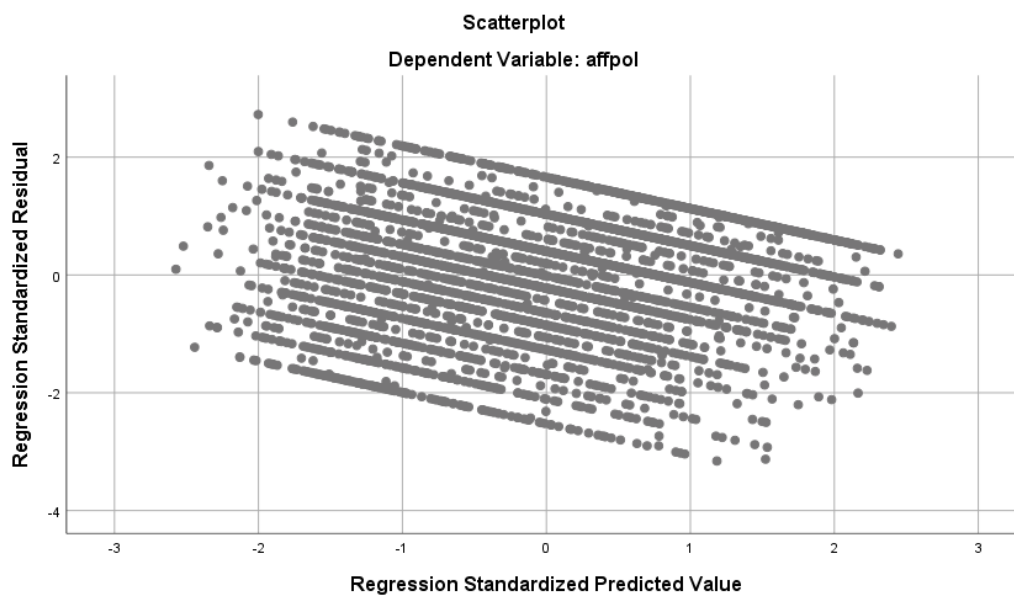
CollegeDegree Black Hispanic Asian_Hawaiian NativeAmerican_Alaska MultipleRaces
ideology

```
party_importance
/PARTIALPLOT ALL
/SCATTERPLOT=(*ZRESID ,*ZPRED)
/RESIDUALS NORMPROB(ZRESID)
/CASEWISE PLOT(ZRESID) OUTLIERS(3)
/SAVE COOK ZRESID SDBETA.
```

A2 – Normality



A3 – Homoscedasticity and linearity



A4 – Multicollinearity

Table 1: Multicollinearity model 1

Model		VIF
1	Constant	
	Closeness	1.000
	Importance	1.000
2	Constant	
	Closeness	2.200
	Importance	1.081
	Female	1.051
	Age	1.111
	Black	1.060
	Hispanic	1.064
	Asian/Hawaiian	1.026
	Native	1.007
	American/Alaskan	
	Multiple races	1.022
	High school graduate	3.532
	College no degree	4.240
	College degree	5.631
	Ideology	2.219
Party importance	1.101	

Appendix B

COMPUTE affpol=ABS(dem_therm - rep_therm).

EXECUTE.

FREQUENCIES VARIABLES=affpol

/HISTOGRAM

/ORDER=ANALYSIS.

USE ALL.

COMPUTE filter_\$=(Party_ID = 1 or Party_ID = 2).

VARIABLE LABELS filter_\$ 'Party_ID = 1 or Party_ID = 2 (FILTER)'.
VALUE LABELS filter_\$ 0 'Not Selected' 1 'Selected'.
FORMATS filter_\$ (f1.0).

FORMATS filter_\$ (f1.0).

FORMATS filter_\$ (f1.0).

FILTER BY filter_\$.

EXECUTE..

COMPUTE rep_relative=(V201336 - V201338) - (V201336 - V201339).

EXECUTE.

COMPUTE dem_relative=(V201336 - V201339) - (V201336 - V201338).

EXECUTE.

RECODE V201231x (MISSING=SYSMIS) (1 thru 3=0) (5 thru 7=1) INTO party_id.

EXECUTE.

RECODE V201231x (3=1) (5=1) (6=2) (2=2) (1=3) (7=3) INTO identity_strength.

EXECUTE.

COMPUTE dem1=(dem_feeling - rep_feeling).

EXECUTE.

COMPUTE rep1=(rep_feeling - dem_feeling).

EXECUTE.

COMPUTE rep_relative=(V201336 - V201338) - (V201336 - V201339).

EXECUTE.

COMPUTE dem_relative=(V201336 - V201339) - (V201336 - V201338).
EXECUTE.

COMPUTE closeness=\$SYSMIS.

IF(partyid_dummy = 0) closeness = dem_relative.

IF(partyid_dummy = 1) closeness = rep_relative.

EXECUTE.

Descriptives

Descriptive Statistics						
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
gender	5402	,00	1,00	,5657	,49571	,246
age	5238	18,00	80,00	52,8698	17,09407	292,207
education	5353	,00	7,00	3,5545	2,04483	4,181
ethnicity	5379	,00	5,00	,5590	1,14900	1,320
ideology	4682	,00	6,00	3,1472	1,80729	3,266
party_importance	5425	,00	4,00	1,8522	1,33767	1,789
affpol	5351	,00	100,00	59,7539	27,88950	777,824
importance_abortion	5413	1,00	5,00	3,6981	1,11105	1,234
closeness	5097	-3,00	3,00	,2521	2,12451	4,514
Valid N (listwise)	4146					